

Aberystwyth University

Distance and Open Learning Courses in Library and Information Studies

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DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING COURSES IN INFORMATION & LIBRARY STUDIES

Non-traditional means of Education

There is a tendency to think of education only in terms of the teacher, surrounded by students, imparting to them his or her knowledge through lectures, seminars, or other didactic means. Much of our formal education is conducted in this manner, by trained teachers, working to agreed curricula, using tried and tested teaching methods, within campus-based institutions devoted to this specific purpose. Yet this is but one of many different means by which individuals become educated, both in terms of the acquisition of learning, and the development of the skills necessary for them to discover further information for themselves. We learn also by emulation or through our own experience or investigation - indeed the whole idea of apprenticeship was based on such emulative and experiential learning.

Formal systems of education are best suited to younger students, particularly those without the financial or social responsibilities that might prevent them from attending classes at fixed times and places or otherwise hinder them from devoting most of their attention to the learning goal. Thus there tends to be a common age at which children begin their schooling, or most young persons move from the broad-based general education provided by primary and secondary schools into the more academic or vocational courses provided by universities or colleges of further education. However individuals are learning throughout their childhood and adult lives, and their individual aspirations and financial circumstances may well change. Also during a period of rapid technological and social change, the skills and knowledge acquired at the outset of a career may become increasingly out of date and irrelevant to their original purpose.

Education is no longer seen as a once and for all opportunity which may be acquired during the first two decades of our lives, and never again thereafter. It is now recognised as a continuing and evolving process that happens throughout our lives, and should be adaptable to suit our particular needs and circumstances. A lifetime's education may well involve a number of different modes of study, following different kinds of curricula, directed at different goals. Such study may be designed to take place within formal educational institutions, at home, and also perhaps in the workplace. A number of alternative modes of education and instruction have developed to take account of this evolving educational process. Concepts such as Continuing Education, Adult Independent Learning, Open Learning, or Distance Learning are all now accepted as an integral part of the educational framework of a society, and as legitimate and effective a means of course delivery as the traditional institutional based education. These non-traditional forms of education are not exclusive from one another but all overlap to some degree.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

As its name indicates, Continuing Education encompasses "the continuing processes of learning and teaching, which do not have an end-product as their goal" ([Haythornthwaite and White, 1989](#)). It may lead to the acquisition of qualifications or certificates as an incidental part of the process, but is primarily undertaken as a means of updating skills, broadening knowledge or else for enjoyment. Continuing Education courses may be of a few hours duration or else extended over one or more years. They may be delivered during the daytime,

at evening classes, residential study schools or through correspondence or other distance learning materials. They may be organised by organisations such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA), by professional organisations, commercial companies or training agencies, or else by the Extra-Mural or teaching departments in Universities or other higher educational institutions.

ADULT INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Adult Independent Learners (AILs) are defined as 'any members of the public who engage in specific learning activities on a regular or an occasional basis - either as individuals or in groups - without enrolling for a course with an education or training agency' ([Smith, 1987](#)). In a survey conducted by the University of Lancaster at the end of the 1970s, four out of five among the adult population considered themselves to fall within this definition.

Some learners may be pursuing hobbies, some trying to cope with short-term projects (often of a practical nature), some trying to improve their [word missing], some trying to gain qualifications, some seeking to improve work related competencies, some concerned with community or civic issues and others simply following a topic or author of interest ([Smith, 1987 p.22](#)).

Two-thirds of all such learning projects are self-planned and self directed. Most of this study has until recently gone unrecognised and has been referred to as an adult learning iceberg ([Dale, 1979](#)).

DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance education is defined by Holmberg as encompassing “the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation” ([Holmberg, 1977](#)). Other terms used to describe this mode of education include correspondence courses, Directed Private Study (DPS), or Independent Learning. Courses may be conducted entirely through the use of packaged learning materials and the return of written assignments, or more usually through a combination of correspondence course and intensive study schools.

Distance learning has a long tradition in the UK, principally through the provision of correspondence courses designed for basic academic, commercial and secretarial qualifications. Until the 1970s this method of course delivery was rarely used for advanced or academic courses. However, following the establishment of the Open University in 1971, new and flexible methods of course delivery were developed, which have gained in popularity and credibility. These have been more student-centred than the traditional correspondence courses and have involved the use of a range of printed and audio visual media as well as such innovations as self-assessment questions. The Open University was world's first university to teach only at a distance, and quickly became a model for a number of similar institutions throughout the world, and for other distance learning courses offered by other UK institutions.

OPEN LEARNING

According to a UNESCO study “Open learning is an imprecise phrase to which a range of meanings can be, and is attached. It eludes definition” ([Mackenzie, Postgate and Scupham, 1978](#)). The term describes a philosophy of education in which as many of the traditional constraints or boundaries on the learning process as possible have been removed. Such constraints may relate to the time and place of study, the methods of finance, entry requirements, the mode and order of course delivery, and even such matters as the learning objectives and assessment methods. Most non-traditional forms of education include certain elements of flexibility usually associated with open learning, although without perhaps embracing the whole philosophy. The Open University in particular was a pioneer in admitting students to its courses with little or no formal educational qualifications, and embraces many of the elements of open learning.

Distance learning courses may include the same academic content, entry requirements, and lead to the same forms of assessment as campus-based courses. Alternatively they may be include more of the features of open learning, with more flexible entry requirements, together with alternative means of course delivery and assessment. Whilst virtually all Open Learning courses will be taught at a distance, not all distance learning courses will encompass all the ideas of open learning. For the purposes of this chapter, courses taught at a distance, but which have a fixed starting point are described as distance learning, whereas those which may be commenced at any time are referred to as open learning. The term correspondence course is used to refer to earlier generation of distance learning programme designed to prepare candidates to sit an external examination along with full-time students.

All of these non-traditional modes of education rely to some degree on the availability of a range of background reading materials, and therefore require the support of the public library service in particular. Likewise they each have some role to play within the education and training of professional librarians and information workers in the United Kingdom ([Watson and Blackie, 1981](#)).

Courses in Information & Library Studies

A wide range of continuing education courses are run by professional bodies such as the Library Association, Aslib, or else by commercial organisations such as Task Force Pro-Libra, as a means of keeping professional librarians up to date with new technologies or techniques. Yet other continuing education short courses are organised by the Departments of Information and Library Studies, as an offshoot of their work in educating young librarians and as a means of retaining links with the professions. Likewise many information workers and those responsible for staff training would include themselves with the definitions of Adult Independent Learners, either to develop new skills or broaden their educational horizons. However, it is chiefly within the areas of distance and open learning that there has been the most profound and far reaching effect on professional education. Distance Education has featured in UK information and library studies for more than ninety years in many different guises, but it is primarily during the last decade that the concept has excited most interest.

PROFESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE COURSES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

Until the mid-nineteenth century most professional education in Britain was conducted according to the apprentice model, with potential practitioners learning from their senior colleagues. However, in the latter half of the century there was a gradual reform of the older

professions such as medicine and law, and the introduction of a number of newer one. The various professional bodies began to assume the role of 'qualifying bodies' and to introduce examinations to test the competence of candidates. The first examinations to be set by the Library Association took place in 1885, but at the time there was no formal educational courses that might be followed, merely a number of part-time training schemes at some of the larger academic and public libraries. This situation was just about adequate for those candidates working for libraries operating such schemes but limited the opportunities for those in other areas, and therefore hampered the development of the new profession. The Association therefore sought to provide other opportunities for training and qualification.

The Library Association was in fact the first professional body in the United Kingdom to concern itself not just with the examination and accreditation of its members, but also directly in their education. After various abortive attempts at establishing study circles and other informal schemes of study, the Association went ahead and established the first professional correspondence course for librarians in 1904 ([Bramley, 1981, pp.61-2](#)). This was offered as an alternative to various other educational initiatives then taking place including classes offered initially by the London School of Economics and then by University College London, and summer schools held at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth. These courses quickly proved to be popular, and for a quarter of a century they provided the only means of study and qualification to many individuals throughout the country, without access to other means of professional education.

However, in 1926 the Association of Assistant Librarians introduced its own series of correspondence courses for the examinations of the Library Association which were somewhat cheaper than the official equivalents. For a few years the two courses ran in parallel, but following the affiliation agreement between these two bodies in 1929 the Library Association phased out its own courses, and left all responsibility for correspondence courses to the AAL ([Bramley, pp.108-9](#)). The provision of the AAL correspondence courses came to be the most important feature of the work of this organisation, and an important factor in its recruitment until the early 1960s. The course ceased to operate in 1964 following the revision of the Library Association syllabus, although there were still a few registered students completing examinations until 1968. Thereafter the National Extension College offered preparation for the Library Association examinations by correspondence until the mid-1970s although this course was never recognised by the association.

The system of professional education in librarianship and information work had developed somewhat during the years between 1930 and 1960 with the introduction of several new schools of librarianship throughout the country offering both full-time and part-time courses leading to the Library Association examinations, as an alternative to correspondence courses. However the system continued to have many limitations, most of which were reflected equally in the campus-based and correspondence courses. All qualifications in librarianship continued to be administered and examined by the Association rather than the institutions which provided the instruction; the courses were of sub-degree level, and largely practice based. Obtaining qualifications under the old syllabus was a long-winded and fragmented process which tended to reinforce the student's knowledge of local practices and procedures at the expense of providing them with a broader picture. Also the qualifications obtained tended to limit their holders to one career and did not have any transferable value or recognition elsewhere. The system was democratic in so far as it was open to all with basic educational qualifications, but it tended to consist of a series of hurdles with many talented

individuals falling at the wayside and remaining only partially qualified throughout their careers.

Over the next two decades the pattern of education changed to being primarily full-time, of degree or postgraduate level, and administered by the universities or equivalent higher educational institutions. Some schools continued to offer part-time courses, and in the later 1970s Leeds Polytechnic even began to investigate offering its part-time BA degree course by distance learning, although they eventually did not proceed with the plan ([Taylor, 1982](#)). During this period of rapid expansion of higher education during the 1960s and early 1970s, part-time education and correspondence courses in particular were portrayed as being an inferior alternative to campus based education - modes of delivery more suited to the needs of professional training in librarianship, rather than the emerging disciplines of information and library studies and information management. Most UK library schools were then seeking to establish their academic credentials as the providers of new graduate or postgraduate educational qualifications. Thus there were few regrets when the correspondence courses offered by the AAL were phased out together with the professional qualifications administered by the Library Association.

During the 1970s as the library schools were withdrawing from teaching for the Library Association syllabus in favour of their own degree courses, an alternative distance learning course was developed in Scotland. Between 1973 and 1981 Napier College in Edinburgh developed an entirely new course “by directed personal study” aimed at preparing students for the Library Association examinations. Although not a fully accredited library school, Napier College’s Department of Library and Information Resources had been operating short courses in librarianship and information science since 1964, directed towards mid-professional and senior sub-professional staff ([McElroy, 1978](#)). Prospective students for the Library Association course had to have both the academic qualifications to secure them entry on to a full time course and some work experience. Considerable effort was put into the preparation of suitable teaching materials and study guides, but even those running the course seemed to consider it to be a second best.

Each student must also satisfy the college that he has good reasons for not going to a full-time course at a library school. Educationalists are in agreement that full-time courses have better long-term effect, academically and personally.

The Napier College course was perhaps introduced too late to have much impact on the pattern of professional education. It continued to operate until 1981, and was then withdrawn and converted into a sub-degree level Higher Certificate course ([Craig and McElroy](#)). By the beginning of the 1980s it was obvious that the Library Association would not remain an examining body for much longer, and the professional qualification was eventually withdrawn in 1985.

SUB-DEGREE COURSES

The establishment of the various full-time degree programmes in information and library studies during the 1970s and 1980s dramatically improved the quality of education in information and library studies. However it also had certain disadvantages. The new system had the effect of preventing those potential students who, for domestic or other reasons, felt unable to interrupt their work in order to attend one of the library schools, from ever progressing within their chosen career. Also there was a tendency for the library schools to

impose artificial and inflexible barriers to entry to their newly established degree courses in terms of a narrow range of academic qualifications, greatly adding to the difficulties encountered by late developers or new entrants to the profession in gaining entry. Thus the changes may have served to create a whole generation of individuals who might have benefited from further or higher education, and made a substantial contribution to their profession, but were prevented from doing so.

One partial response to this problem was the establishment of sub-degree level courses for assistants working in a library environment, but who were unwilling or unable to attend a full-time course at a library school to achieve formal qualification. The most important of these was the Library Assistant's Certificate, validated by the City and Guilds of London Institute. By the mid 1970s, this course was attracting about 600 students a year, working at nearly 50 part-time centres ([Whatley, 1977](#)). In Scotland, the equivalent qualification was a National Certificate in Library and Information Science originally validated by the Scottish Technical Educational Council (SCOTEC) and subsequently the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). This course has been operated by Edinburgh's Telford College since 1985 in a number of different delivery modes, including full-time, part-time, day-release and by open learning. This has attracted in the region of 120 students each year each year studying for between one and six modules. The following year an open learning course studying for the City and Guilds examinations, principally for students based in England, Wales and Ireland, and which has attracted an annual intake of between 100 and 180 students (information from Donald Steele, Edinburgh's Telford College).

There is also a Higher National Certificate in Library and Information Science as a natural progression for those with the National Certificate or City and Guilds examinations. Telford offers the only full-time course in the UK, along with day-release provision. However it was this qualification, to which the original distance learning course at Napier College was adapted in 1983 ([Craig & McElroy, 154-7](#)). After running successfully with an intake of about twenty-five students for five years, the curriculum was overhauled and it was re-introduced by the newly re-titled Napier Polytechnic in September 1989 ([Craig, 1988](#)). Napier have also used many of their distance learning materials in an initiative involving the Mauritius College of the Air to train school librarians.

SPECIALISED DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES

Although Distance Education was not available for any degree level or professional qualification in librarianship and information studies after the demise of the first Napier College Course, this teaching mode was adopted for a number of more specialised continuing education courses intended to enhance the skills and update qualifications of those working in this area. By the end of the 1980s there was a feeling that distance education "should be a mode of instruction uniquely suited to librarians and information specialists. This curiosity about the topic has led to a respectable number of meetings and seminars but, as yet, surprisingly few packages" ([Haythornthwaite and White, 1989](#)). It was at one of these seminars held at Loughborough in 1987 that Peter Havard-Williams presented a paper in which he perceived the need for a survey of distance education the courses available in the UK, and a comparison with the situation overseas ([Havard-Williams and Burrell, 1986](#)). Such a survey was carried out by Jo Haythornthwaite and Frances White, in 1988, and published by the British Library the following year as *Distance Learning in Library and Information Studies*. It identified seven existing courses of widely differing academic levels and durations from a variety of educational institutions. However one of the inescapable conclusions from

this report was that until then this mode of course delivery had had a limited impact on the UK LIS education scene, particularly when compared with some of the developments taking place elsewhere in the English speaking World, notably in Australia and South Africa. One reasons for this may well be the pattern of funding in UK higher education, where resources follow students on new courses, rather than precede them. Thus the development of innovative new courses either requires specific funding from special programmes or else the investment of existing operational funds.

The earliest venture into distance education by one the accredited library schools was a 13-week course entitled 'Statistics for librarians' developed by Newcastle Polytechnic in 1982/3. There was a perceived need for qualified information workers to be able to use statistical techniques and present data more effectively, which was shown by the success of Ian Simpson's textbook of the same title ([Simpson, 1975](#)). This need formed the basis of an application for funding under the Department of Education and Science Professional, Industrial and Commercial Updating (PICKUP) initiative to fund the development of appropriate distance learning materials from an existing 'presentation of statistics element' taught. The grant paid for the services of a Research Assistant for fifteen months to co-ordinate the production of the course materials, administer the initial cohort of students, and evaluate the project, whilst the course materials were written by the academic staff ([Blackie, 1983](#)). Although the course, was judged to be a success, it only survived for three cohorts of students. This was due in part to the retirement of the member of staff most concerned and the lack of continuing administrative support. However the Department did subsequently use some of the experience gained from this course in developing distance learning materials for training school librarians in Papua New Guinea. In this case the units were developed by staff of the department and supported by local workshops and a summer school.

This survey also included a number of other specialised short courses such as a 40-hour distance learning course offered by Edinburgh's Telford College, in Modern Library Technology. This was not aimed at any specific qualification, rather a College Certificate, and was intended for "librarians at any level wishing to update their knowledge and familiarise themselves with new technology" ([Haythornthwaite and White, 1989, p.40](#)). Information technology is a notoriously difficult subject to teach in a traditional distance learning mode, and so in addition to forty hours of correspondence materials, those participants able to attend the college were also offered three optional practical evening sessions. Haythornthwaite and White also noted book indexing courses by the Rapid Results College Society of Indexers, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education Technology offered by Jordanhill College of Education, and an intensive (and partly residential) MBA in Information Management offered by the International Management Centre from Buckingham.

Two further short courses were introduced by Telford in 1989, each of 80-hours duration. These were entitled Running a School Library - intended for teachers responsible for collections without library qualifications - and Management for Senior Library Assistants. These have attracted some twenty and forty students per year respectively (information from Donald Steele, Edinburgh's Telford College). Distance learning programmes in media librarianship and educational technology and also for medical librarians were being developed at Leeds Polytechnic during the academic year 1984/5, ([Bromley and Allott, 1988, p.40](#)) but appear to have been abandoned soon afterwards on the retirement of the member of staff responsible. Other ventures by library and information schools have included the conversion of specific modules for distance learning delivery, frequently associated with

franchising agreements with overseas institutions. One example is the use by the University of Sheffield of distance learning techniques for the delivery of a part of its Msc in information management to students in Lisbon (information from Professor Tom Wilson).

MASTERS DEGREE COURSES

The first substantial venture into distance education by a UK library school began in November 1985, when the College of Librarianship Wales accepted fifteen students on to a three-year course leading to a Master's degree in the management of library and information services. The course was not intended to provide an initial qualification in information and library studies, but rather as a means of equipping qualified and experienced staff with the necessary skills to take management posts. It was open to both existing graduate librarians or the holders of postgraduate qualifications, together with the holders of non-graduate professional qualifications together with substantial work experience.

The course attracted considerable interest among working librarians who felt that either the skills required to be updated or else their professional qualifications needed enhancement. The following year numbers were increased to allow for an annual intake of about thirty-five students, which has been maintained ever since. The Aberystwyth course consists of four taught modules taken over two-years (including compulsory attendance at two summer schools) together with a further supervised year undertaking a 20,000 word dissertation. Study packs for the modules included both printed materials and audio lecture tapes. Learner support is provided by individual academic staff who would be appointed as personal tutors to individual students, meeting them at study schools and subsequently providing detailed feedback on written assignments either by correspondence or telephone.

The first cohort of students were still in process of completing their work in 1988 as Haythornthwaite and White were completing their survey, it was therefore difficult for them to assess the likely impact of the course. However a detailed report by those responsible for its design subsequently appeared in the journal *Education for Information* ([Edwards, Roberts & Tunley, 1990](#)). The primary reason for the establishment of the course in this delivery mode was claimed to be 'the needs of the LIS community in the UK as reflected in formal and informal market research', including survey work by Aslib and others pinpointing 'the need for continuing education and staff development with a management focus'. Another factor in the college's decision to move into this area of education was the need to maintain student numbers and if possible expand its masters programmes. This was particularly important as it was then negotiating a merger with the neighbouring University College of Wales, to become the University of Wales Aberystwyth, Department of Information and Library Studies. The size of the library school and its geographical location remote from any major areas of population hindered any attempts at providing part-time courses, and therefore made distance learning seem a more attractive option. It was also clear by 1990 that the quality of the students recruited on to this course, and the standard of work submitted was at least as good, and sometimes better as those to be found on the more traditional full-time masters degree courses. At this level of education, the ability to relate essays, course assignments and dissertations to workplace situations more than counteracted the inherent disadvantages of the distance learning mode of delivery.

Immediately following the successful merger in 1989, the new department began to form plans for extending their range of distance learning programmes, and marketing some the existing courses overseas. The first of these developments concerned the production of a

double module in 'Schools and Young People's Librarianship' intended to provide some degree of optionality to the second-year of the existing management course. The plans for this course were drawn up following discussions with professional bodies, and an assessment made of the likely demand. Once again, there has been a steady takeup of places, indicating a substantial latent demand among qualified librarians in employment, for this level of education provided in a distance learning mode. From September 1994 an additional Collection Management module was added, providing a greater degree of choice in the second year of this course.

The next Aberystwyth venture followed a number of enquiries from individual students and from British Council offices overseas. Initially these were discouraged since the course had been designed and structured entirely for the UK market, and it was felt that the distance learning course would not be able to take account of the local situation, whereas the full-time equivalent courses operated by the Department could. However, early in the 1990s it became apparent that there was a substantial, albeit temporary, market for masters level courses in Hong Kong during the period in the run-up to the return of the colony to the government of mainland China in 1997. With the assistance of the local British Council, the department began to market its distance learning courses in the colony, and the numbers of students were sufficient to warrant sending appropriate Aberystwyth staff to conduct special study schools there. The Hong Kong venture certainly proved to be most successful in its early years, but recent numbers have not been as high. The Department is therefore reviewing extending the course elsewhere in South-east Asia and other locations overseas.

One further highly successful Aberystwyth venture into distance learning was a separate M.Sc. in 'Information Systems and Services for Health Care' designed primarily for those working within the UK's National Health Service (NHS), concerned with the management of health related information, within both libraries and other information services. The management changes that were then taking place within the health services and the rapid introduction of information technology was creating a considerable market for such courses. The intended market, and the educational rationale for such a non-generic information management course was set out in a paper by John Hepworth:

It is to the discredit and disadvantage of the NHS that it has largely failed to follow private sector organisations and local government in recognising the value of these [i.e. Information Management] university and professional qualifications. By its failure to establish any specific information grades, employing many information workers on clerical or administrative scales, the NHS has been uncompetitive with employers in other sectors.

... The Msc draws upon the disciplines of information science and information management to select that body of transferable principles which best inform the handling of all kinds of health information. Its target audience is those who perceive that information skills are central to their current posts or to anticipated career directions - the emphasis therefore is upon those whose major concern is the collection, organisation, provision and exploitation of information ([Hepworth, 1993, p254 & 257](#)).

A brief survey of the relevance of this course to needs of the students' in their working environments was conducted in 1993, after it had been in operation for nearly three years. This indicated that by the end of the second year a large majority had already been able to apply the assignments, skills, knowledge or information gained on the course to enhance their jobs.

From September 1993, the course was renamed 'Health Information Management' and an alternative exit point was provided leading to a Postgraduate Diploma rather than a Master's Degree for those candidates who successfully completed the two year's guided tuition, but were unwilling or unable to proceed to the completion of a dissertation. The new course had begun in a small way with 11 students admitted in 1990, but numbers quickly increased to an annual intake of about thirty students which has since been sustained. As with the 'young people's librarianship' course, the 'Health Information Management course' initially made use of some of the Distance Learning materials provided for the earlier management course, but these were fairly rapidly replaced by newer materials which covered the topics or provided learning materials more directly related to the health context.

The University of Wales Health Information Management course has proved to be so successful that it has both attracted substantial funding support from the National Health Service, and has since been emulated by other institutions offering campus-based or part-time equivalents. The course materials were also subsequently repackaged to be offered to full-time students at Aberystwyth. This is the reverse of the usual trend whereby distance learning programmes are adapted from existing full-time equivalents. Whether it can retain this level of success in the face of competition and reduced funding for training within the National Health Service remains to be seen, but it is widely recognised that there is an ongoing need for education in this field.

A hybrid M.A. course in Information and Library Studies was introduced by Brighton Polytechnic (now the University of Brighton) in 1991 with the first five students graduating in 1995. Under this scheme students stay spend one week at college for each of ten modules, having previously been sent introductory readings and other course materials. After this period of study they will return to their homes for further study and to complete their assignments. It is an examples flexible scheme designed for an annual intake of about twelve mature students in work, who are able to schedule periods of leave to coincide with their periods of attendance (information from Nicola Smith, University of Brighton).

FIRST DEGREE COURSES

Although the AAL correspondence courses survived until the end of the 1970s, for the final decade, they were leading to what was increasingly regarded as a second-class qualification. Thereafter all distance learning courses in library and information studies were either at a sub-professional level - for those not intending to proceed to a career, or else were designed for students who had already obtained a basic qualification by full-time study but who subsequently wished to enhance or update them. Thus there was no route by which those candidates unable to attend a library school might attain a basic professional qualification. Yet there was a prolonged and continual demand from both employers and potential students for just such a course.

In 1992 the University of Wales obtained funding, under the Universities Funding Council Flexible Learning Programme to investigate the introduction of a first degree in information and library studies by distance learning, incorporating a number of features of open learning. This would be available to mature students without any specified entry qualification, rather a basic level of educational achievement together with at least one year of experience working in a library or information environment (the number of years experience required depends on the other qualifications held). The combination of substantial experiential learning in the workplace together with other academic qualifications such as the Higher Certificate is used

to gain students exemption from the Part 1 of their degree course (equivalent to their first year studies). Students are given the opportunity to develop their skills in Information Technology and Human Communication at an intensive introductory study school, followed by an equivalent period working on their own.

The complete degree scheme involves the completion of a further twenty modules and an undergraduate dissertation (which equates to a double module). Unlike the Aberystwyth masters courses, there was no tightly specified periods of study. Students are allowed to work through the modules at their own pace, taking between three and five years to complete the course.

The bulk of the course delivery for this degree is through printed materials, together with photocopied readings - along the lines of Open University modules, but audio, video and computerised learning materials are also be used as well as annual attendance at three five-day study schools. Access to an IBM 386 or equivalent microcomputer, together with a basic integrated applications package such as Microsoft *Works*, either at home or at work, is also a pre-requisite to acceptance on the course. The content, delivery, and the means of assessment of the proposed new degree scheme was most rigorously scrutinised by a hitherto traditional university, founded in the nineteenth century, and jealous of its academic traditions. Several of the more radical innovations, such as the abolition of unseen examinations, had to be sacrificed during this process in order to reassure those with any doubts about the standards to be upheld. The scheme was also subject to the validation procedures of the Library Association and Institute of Information Science.

Without any formal publicity, and prior even to approval of the new course by the University of Wales, the Department began to receive a stream of enquiries and then applications, from potential candidates, throughout Great Britain, and occasionally on the Continent, many of whom had been waiting for years for such an educational opportunity. Typical candidates are individuals with several years of experience in information work, but unable to progress to more responsible posts. The majority also had the academic qualifications necessary to attend a full-time university course as a mature student, but felt unable to do so. Indeed many had only discovered their chosen career path after they had married, had children, and acquired the usual financial commitments which tend to prevent adults from giving up their jobs and going to college. Some candidates had already been to university and had first degrees in other subjects, but in the absence of any distance learning postgraduate opportunities for a first qualification in information and library studies, have chosen to study for a second bachelor's degree in order to qualify. The demand from good-quality candidates was so great that the initial plans for an intake of about fifteen students each year were enlarged to allow for two intakes per year, each of about thirty students. From the initial intake in December 1993 the course has been consistently oversubscribed, with many suitably qualified candidates having to wait for places on later intakes.

The initial funding for the undergraduate course covered a feasibility study and the employment of staff to within a newly established Open Learning Unit to administer and support the course. The content of each module, the detailed feedback provided in response to assessed course work, and the teaching at study schools is however the responsibility of the existing academic staff.. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Open Learning Unit was set up to provide support for all the distance and open learning activities of the university, although to date these have been mainly concerned with the undergraduate distance learning programmes in information and library studies (World-Wide Web Home Page

<http://www.aber.ac.uk/~olu/olu1.html>). The role of this group of staff has included recruitment and financial administration, staff training, organising the study schools, co-ordinating the production of the modules and other teaching materials, and providing individual student support and guidance by means of a telephone hot-line, and where possible email. They also produce a periodic newsletter *Voluble* which is sent to all of the Department's distance learning students in an attempt at fostering contact between students who might otherwise feel rather isolated. The production of a sufficient number of modules has placed, and continues a considerable strain on the teaching resources of the Department. This was particularly so as the numbers of students on the course, and the speed at which many of them have completed the available modules have exceeded initial expectations. However the challenge of preparing them has given academic staff the opportunity to re-assess the range of their teaching.

On the evidence of the first three intakes, it appears the overall performance of the distance learning undergraduate students is equally as good as those on the full-time courses, and there has been a very low drop-out rate. Support from employers to those attending the course has also been extremely varied, ranging from fairly generous help with fees or the purchase of books, together with the provision of study leave at one extreme, to positive obstructionism - such as the refusal to allow candidates on the course to receive telephone calls from the college staff during working hours - at the other. The older students on this course are sometimes portrayed as slower to pick up new ideas and techniques, particularly in a subject such as information technology, when compared with their younger counterparts on the full-time course. However if this is the case it is more than compensated for by their increased commitment, a greater level of maturity, and the breadth of practical experience. The standard of written work has also been good, and with isolation from other students, and an occasional lack of self-confidence as the most common stumbling blocks.

There have also been difficulties experienced by a proportion of students in gaining access to essential background readings which has necessitated special arrangements with the departmental library, and the purchase of specific 'distance learning' copies of basic texts which are not available for loan to campus-based students. The Open Learning Unit has also sought to gain copyright clearance for the reproduction of newspaper and journal articles, and excerpts from books in special 'readings packs' to be supplied alongside the basic course materials. This practice was necessitated because so that the individual course materials or the complete course could be sold to individuals who were not registered students, or else franchised to other institutions at a later date. Experience in negotiating the relevant copyright clearances for readings packs with a range of commercial and professional publishers has been both time consuming and problematic, with examples of considerable generosity and also demands unreasonable reproduction fees coming from the most unexpected quarters.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Over the last decade distance learning courses in information and library studies have made a comeback, and at the time of writing several UK schools are either preparing programmes or else investigating possibilities of adapting existing materials both for the home or overseas. The University of Northumbria (formerly Newcastle Polytechnic) are currently developing distance learning materials for a postgraduate diploma in Records Management, and the University of Wales Aberystwyth are about to introduce an undergraduate Certificate in Health Informatics (information from Joan Day, University of Northumbria and Jane Goodfellow, University of Wales Aberystwyth.). Sheffield are also exploring the distance

delivery of modules in their MSc in Health Information Management and have applied for curriculum development funds from the University (information from Tom Wilson). Similarly the Department of Information Studies at the University of Strathclyde is taking part in a faculty-wide investigation into adapting its existing Diploma/MSc course for distance learning purposes (information from Paul Burton, University of Strathclyde).

Edinburgh's Telford College is also introducing a number of further open learning short courses during 1995. These include User Education and Libraries aimed at staff of any level who are involved in this task, and an Higher National Certificate in European Information Services. Likewise Open Learning in Public Libraries is provided for staff supporting adult learners under the 'Open for Learning' scheme. Napier Polytechnic has recently been awarded university status and is currently re-assessing its distance learning programmes, with aim of moving towards the introduction of a full degree programme in information and library studies, aimed at both the UK and overseas markets either by itself or else perhaps in collaboration with another institution (information from David Craig, Napier University).

Radical developments in distance learning are likely to involve the greater use of IT and computer networks as a means of overcoming student isolation. The advent of electronic mail and the formation of discussion groups and electronic seminars would appear to have great potential utility in this area. Staff at Aberystwyth considered using email as an essential component of their undergraduate course but eventually had to defer the idea as so few of the potential students had access to modems or other Internet connections. Email is however used by those who do have such access for keeping in touch with the college, and the number is increasing with every intake. At the time of writing, the University of Brighton is seeking funding to provide all the students on their course with a modem, for the same purpose (information from Nicola Smith). Likewise Sheffield is experimenting with the use of CD-ROM as a means of delivery and is also looking at the use of World-Wide Web, whereas Aberystwyth are seeking further funds to develop computer assisted learning (CAL) packages in this area.

Although all of the degree level and postgraduate courses established in the last decade contain some elements of flexibility when compared with traditional campus-based education, none of them can be described as embodying all of the principles of 'Open Learning'. In every situation there is some form of prior educational requirement, fixed order of study, and traditional means of assessment. There have also been discussions as to whether there is a place for adapting the ideas and principles of open learning to the LIS curriculum, although to date no specific proposals have been made. Whether such proposals will ultimately be able to satisfy both the academic requirements of the educational institution concerned and the accreditation requirements of the appropriate professional bodies remains to be seen.

The Role of distance learning IN LIS

Although the non-traditional courses outlined above have been subject to the same levels of academic scrutiny as campus-based courses, and in spite of the excellent performance by many of the students on these courses, the re-introduction of distance learning has nevertheless given rise to some disquiet among traditional educationalists in the area ([Stoker, 1995](#)). The concerns centre upon the use distance learning schemes for the provision of generic LIS qualifications (such as the Aberystwyth undergraduate course) rather than the more specialised or sub-degree level courses. Several of the author's colleagues who either

witnessed or else themselves went through the part-time or correspondence based professional education during the 1950s and 1960s, and who have struggled for the establishment and recognition of full-time graduate courses in information and library studies, have seen this new development as a retrograde step. Fears have been expressed that the Aberystwyth undergraduate course sets a dangerous precedent which could ultimately serve to undermine the viability full-time courses, by providing a cheaper, more flexible, but ultimately impoverished student experience, although equal in academic standing. A future government might use it any generic postgraduate diploma/masters equivalents as a model for all future professional education and therefore cease to provide support for full-time courses. Alternatively, impecunious students may in future feel pressurised to opt for distance learning as an alternative because they are worried about getting in to debt. Such a change, if it ever took place, would be bound to be to the detriment of the majority of students, who currently derive substantial benefit from full-time, uninterrupted study away from the pressures of family or work, and in an environment where the teaching expertise and learning materials are readily available.

On the other hand, proponents of distance learning would portray it as a welcome means of complementing the existing pattern of education by providing alternative educational routes to the same end. They would argue that educational philosophies and teaching methods have changed dramatically and the current distance learning courses cannot be compared with the correspondence courses of thirty years ago. In this interpretation distance learning courses might be portrayed as better suited to the needs of mature students or those with domestic or financial commitments that would otherwise prevent them from following any alternative.

Experience has shown that distance learning is neither an easy option for those students who choose to study in this way, nor a particularly cheap method of delivery for those colleges providing the courses. The start-up and administration costs for a properly run distance learning programme can be quite substantial. However, over a period of years those costs can be recouped, and from the point of view of the government there are decided advantages in having a substantial student body that does not require maintenance grants, and is also paying taxes during the course of its education.

Few would argue that distance learning is a most useful and cost-effective means of enhancing or updating existing information and library skills and qualifications. However, it needs to be monitored carefully if it is also to be applied to entry qualifications for the profession. Full-time graduate or postgraduate education in a library school ought to remain the usual and preferred route for all those who are able to take advantage of it. Any attempt by government to undermine this situation for financial reasons should be resisted -

particularly by those who have already benefited from the many advantages of full-time education.

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